

Ryan Taylor

AP Literature and Composition

Title Analysis - "Fire and Ice"

15 January 2010

What's in a Title?

The poem "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost is a relatively short work and as such each phrase contains a great deal of meaning, and none more so than the title. A title is the opening statement of any text, much like a name proceeds a person. A title is different from a name due to the tendency for the text that follows it is inevitably defined and shaped by it, unlike a person or an object, whose names follow their natures. Sometimes, however, the title of a work is not cut-and-dry. A very strong case of this exists in "Fire and Ice," where the denotations associated with both fire and ice are contrasted with their connotations in order to create a powerful statement.

"Fire and Ice" is not entirely defined by its title due to the aforementioned connotations of the words "fire" and "ice." Fire is commonly thought of as a destructive force, and is also connoted with "heat" or "passion." Ice, on the other hand, would be more closely associated with "cold" and "freezing." Therefore, the title is something of a contradiction. How can two such opposite forces as fire and ice be together? This basic conflict sets the stage for the entire poem.

The poem approaches both "fire" and "ice" as destructive forces, which they are by denotation. Both terms could be considered either literally or symbolically. Literally, both fire and ice could destroy the world as we know it. Consider the possible connotations with, say, another ice age, or a meteor or some other fiery ending. These associations lend themselves to the poems thinly veiled symbolic meaning, namely, that "fire" and "ice" represent attitudes

or emotions in people.

“Fire” is symbolic of passion and desire in the poem. The text states that “From what I’ve tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire,” (3-4) which makes the word “fire” in the title symbolic of desire. Desire is connected to destruction by the negative destructive connotation of fire. It is also a consuming force, considering how rampant desire, like the poem suggests, can change a person. This would almost never be for the better, again considering all of the connotation employed. “Fire” is representative of desire, and like fire, desire can consume and destroy.

“Ice” is similarly related to hatred. The expression “giving someone the cold shoulder” is one possible example of this connotation. Also, just as ice would be a slower end than fire, hate takes much longer to destroy than desire or passion. Hate can often be endured for a short time, but in the long run, it is as damaging as any other sudden action. The poem states that ice’s power “Is also great / And would suffice” (8-9). This statement symbolizes hatred’s slower but still powerful force.

Since both “fire” and “ice” represent emotions in this poem, the meaning of the title changes. Where before the title showed too polar opposites, now it is united by one common trait: destruction. The individual words themselves each connote different methods by which the destruction they could bring could come about, whether by desire or hate. Either method “would suffice” (9) as the text says, but it is more inclined to believe that fire, and symbolically desire, would do it first. [Both of these words are important to understanding the meaning of the text. Either force “would” be able to cause destruction. However, “suffice” has a connotation that suggests closer to the minimum required, or that the power is merely sufficient. The phrase as a whole](#) is speaking of the speed with which both forces work: fire is fast and furious, while ice is slow and ponderous. Both will have the same result eventually.

This similarity in purpose and result brings the two, “fire” and “ice,” together. Therefore, what at first appear to be contradicting elements in the title are in fact very similar, if not in method then in result. This interesting play on two terms with opposing connotations, but similar ends, creates a powerful effect through which the poem conveys its statement.

Works Cited

Frost, Robert. "Fire and Ice." *Perrines's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. Eds. Greg Johnson and Thomas R. Arp. Ninth ed. Boston, MA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006. 746. Print.